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ABSTRACT

This article outlines some basic linguistic principles that provide a foundation for the recognition of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a legitimate language system that is not only an asset to its speakers, but has also made valuable contributions to American society in terms of artistic expression of identity and community. The way in which teachers approach AAVE in the classroom can have a profound impact on the academic success of their students. Viewing AAVE as an asset to be built upon fosters a classroom culture that affirms students' identity and intellectual ability and increases the likelihood that students will see school and literacy as relevant to their lives. An extensive literature review is provided to bolster the argument that bilingual models applied to the case of bidialectalism point to the usefulness of both Standard English and AAVE. (Contains 42 references.) (KFT)

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Linguistic Perspectives on African American Vernacular English and Implications for the Language Arts Classroom

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Abstract

This article outlines some basic linguistic principles that provide a foundation for the recognition of African American Vernacular English as a legitimate language system which is not only an asset to its speakers, but has also made valuable contributions to American society in terms of artistic expression, the formation and expression of political thought, and the development and expression of identity and community. The way in which teachers approach AAVE in the classroom can have a profound impact on the academic success of their students. Viewing AAVE as an asset to be built upon fosters a classroom culture that affirms students' identity and intellectual ability and increases the likelihood that students will see school and literacy as relevant to their lives.

Linguistic Perspectives on African American Vernacular English and Implications for the Language Arts Classroom

African American Vernacular English is a linguistic legacy- a cultural and linguistic transmission from generation to generation beginning with Africans brought to North America as slaves. Its origins and the reasons for its survival are tied up with social, historical, racial, and linguistic realities. AAVE has not only enriched the lives of its speakers, but it has affected language and experiences of standard English speakers as well. For the most part standard English speakers do not give credit to AAVE, rather it is asserted that AAVE is slang, that it is poor English, that it is the reason so many of its speakers are failing in school. From a linguist's viewpoint, however, AAVE is a legitimate language system, capable of all the artistic, truth-telling expression of a particular human world-view that is as unique and radically different as it is ordinary and like every other language and dialect in the world.

AAVE is a dialect that allows for cultural and linguistic transmission of tradition and history, it represents and gives voice to a world view, and it is an expression of pride in identity and community. In this paper, I will explore the theoretical foundations for the equality of languages and dialects and the value of linguistic diversity. I will also explore a few of the areas in which AAVE has made valuable contributions. AAVE has proven to be a linguistic vehicle for the unique world-view of its speakers, providing the possibility for unique semantic representations and expressions of that world-view. AAVE has also been a linguistic vehicle for counter-hegemonic and political protest and expression- a subversive tool for truth-telling. AAVE affirms personal identity, and unifies its speakers' common identity. AAVE is a medium of artistic expression and has enriched this country's artistic landscape. All of these areas are intimately related and taken cumulatively should give us pause as we consider the value, contribution, and integralness of AAVE to our separate and collective American experience. In light of the linguistic principles outlined in the first section, the second section of the paper explores implications for the language arts classroom and how teachers have the opportunity to view AAVE as a tool for the academic success of AAVE speaking students.

Theoretical Foundations for the value of linguistic diversity

People who believe in language rights and the importance of linguistic diversity may not need to be reminded of the theoretical foundations for these beliefs. And people who operate under the assumption that some languages are superior to other languages may have a belief system that will remain unchanged after hearing arguments in favor of language rights and language diversity. However, I think that it is an important intellectual exercise to look at the very basic tenets that underlie the case for language rights and linguistic diversity.

All languages (and dialects) are equal. All language systems have in place a grammatical, lexical, and semantic structure that allows for human expression and innovation through language. Every language has the capacity to express abstract ideas and the potential for change as its speakers see necessary and useful. No language has been found to be significantly more complex in its grammatical system [Kroch and Labov, 1972 in (Weinreich, 1953)]. As Sapir stated, "When it comes to linguistic form, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucious with the head-hunting savage of Assam" (Baugh, 1999). In the case of AAVE and Standard English, they are both social dialects, neither one more proper or correct than the other. The dialect of English that is considered 'standard' just happens to be the dialect used by those in power (Smitherman, 1972).

There is, therefore, no language whose speakers have better cognitive ability than speakers of another language because of some supposed cognitive superiority of one language over another. Kroch and Labov (1972) state: "Linguists agree that all children who have learned to speak a human language have a capacity for concept formation beyond our present power to analyze" (Baugh, 1999). Knowing one language over another will not make you smarter or give you a greater capacity for concept formation. One person, in response to the Oakland Ebonics controversy and the push to teach students Standard English, emphasized that learning Standard English is not going to make students smarter (Perry & Delpit, 1998). Students are already smart. Adding another language will add another tool and vehicle of expression and reception of ideas and knowledge, but their cognitive capacity is not determined by the dialect of English or the language they speak.

The language system that is used by the dominant group and considered "standard" is arbitrary. In the United States, what is considered Standard English is not considered standard because of some inherent superiority over other dialects of English. John McWhorter, an associate professor of Linguistics at Berkeley, was interviewed on Forum recently and talked about how people all around the world apply arbitrary labels to dialects- what is proper, what is quaint, what is vulgar or incorrect (McWhorter, 2000). According to McWhorter, people around the world generally consider rural language to be quaint, while urban language is generally considered to be vulgar. What people see as proper has a lot to do with who is in power: who controls the press and who has a large stake in the economy. When speakers of a particular dialect become accustomed to seeing their dialect in print, they see some legitimization and standardization of their dialect and consider the grammar of the printed language as correct (Baugh, 1983a). Then, the printed linguistic system is seen as the norm from which other systems deviate. It was not long ago that what we consider standard English did not have a "norm" for spelling. People spelled words the way they heard the words (what teachers now call 'inventive spelling'). The spellings that were chosen and canonized by Webster were somewhat arbitrary, just as the language that we call standard is arbitrary.

Linguistic rights are civil or human rights. Aside from the fact that linguistic diversity benefits society, some have proposed that language rights should be considered a basic human right, or a civil right (see Crawford for legal history on this issue)(Crawford, 1995). The "Declaration of Children's Linguistic Human Rights" states that children have the right to positively identify with their mother tongue, to learn it, and to choose when to use it (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988). As Nieto (2000) points out, language majority children are given these basic rights while the same rights are consistently denied to language minority children. Language is an essential part of what it means to be human. Humboldt states, "Where the raw materials of inner perception and sensation are to be imprinted with conceptualization everything depends on the individual way of looking at things of an individual human being whose language is an inseparable part of him" (Humboldt, 1963). But it is not just language in the generic sense of the term, it is the particular language and particular dialect and form which is an

inseparable part of every individual, and to deny a person his or her language is to deny him or her part of his/herself.

Linguistic diversity is valuable. The Linguistic Society of America's Statement on Language Rights simply states: "there are individual and group benefits to maintaining vernacular speech varieties and there are scientific and human advantages to linguistic diversity" (Perry & Delpit, 1998). Because language is limiting in its ability to represent every subtlety of humans' everyday observations as well as profound ideas, it is important to have as many linguistic approaches to representing our world as possible. Humboldt (1963) acknowledges that many people argue that it would be simpler and better if everyone could just choose one language and be done with it. However, Humboldt argues that "since the spirit which constantly reveals itself in the world can never be exhaustively known through any given number of views or opinions, but is always discovered to contain something new, it would be far better to multiply the languages on earth as many times as the number of earth's inhabitants might permit" (Humboldt, 1963). It is presumptuous to assume that one language (or one dialect of one language) could suffice for all the expression and representation needs of the human experience. The more languages and dialects we have to know the truth/spirit revealed in the world, the better.

Language is what makes us human, suggests Humboldt (1963), and I would add that the vast diversity of language due to the uniqueness of individuals and groups of individuals is what makes us humanity. To take away from this diversity, or to deny it its due respect is to strip us of part of our humanity. Conversely, if we embrace linguistic diversity and love language and its speakers, we could be transformed and enriched.

> Once the pleasure in language as language is awakened, it does away with the arrogant revulsion which is still today frequently felt against dialect and conversational idiom, a feeling which carries the seed of death for all strength and vigor in a language and a nation. But loving language for what it is, in its live state, would cause a rapport between the upper classes and the masses; culture would gain a more wholesome direction, and

> one's care for the refinement of language would be more fruitful if one first loved it in its freshness, intimacy, and crudity. (Humboldt, 1963)

In the following sections, I will explore a few of the ways in which AAVE and its speakers have contributed to the linguistic wealth and vigor in the U.S.

Linguistic functions and features of AAVE

Uniqueness of expression and representation

African American Vernacular English, like any dialect or language, has forms of representation and expression that are unique to it. Although AAVE and English are, for the most part, mutually intelligible, the origins of AAVE and the experience and traditions of its speakers have expanded and altered the lexical and semantic system of English. Geneva Smitherman identifies some of the sources of what she calls Black Semantics in her book *Talkin and Testifyin*. These include West African Language background, experience of servitude and oppression, the traditional black church, and music and cool talk (Smitherman, 1977). Basically, all four of these sources point to the unique experience and world view of African Americans, and this is the basic foundation for the creation and adaptation of language unique enough to represent that experience.

Some features of Black English were originally loan translations from African languages. Expressions like 'bad mouth' and 'cool' were literal translations from African languages, and although the lexical items may have already existed in English in some form, a new lexical form and/or another semantic layer was added. The new lexical expression and added semantic layer may or may not end up being incorporated into Standard English. Part of the reason for the expanded semantic associations of particular lexical items came as a result of the type of early language contact with English. If the encounters with the dominant language were few or impoverished in some way (educating slaves being illegal) many semantic elements may be assigned to a few lexical items (Sutcliffe & Figueroa, 1992). For example in Jamaican Creole, the word "make" is used to mean *make, persuade*, or *suggest*. So if someone says, "Mek di man do it, nuh!", a listener who is employing the Standard American English semantic association may interpret "make" as *force*, when the meaning implied may be *ask* (Sutcliffe &

Figueroa, 1992). Sutcliffe and Figueroa (1992) make the point that people in deprived situations know how to improvise. If the language does not serve the needs of the individual or community, the language will be innovated, expanded, and used as a tool that can more closely approximate the full meaning and complexity of their human experience. To some degree English was being analyzed by a different linguistic (and I would also argue cultural) system, especially at the early stages of language contact (Sutcliffe & Figueroa, 1992). This resulted in some separation of the English surface structures from the English language system, making room for another system (African language based) to function while using the surface features of English (Sutcliffe & Figueroa, 1992). While these are some of the sources of linguistic uniqueness, over time AAVE has changed and shifted to serve the changing needs of its speakers. This dynamic process could be considered in terms of a continual back and forth movement between thought and language (Vygotsky, 1962).

The relationship between thought and language is key to the significance and uniqueness of AAVE. In his book, *Language and Thought*, Vygotsky argues that meaning is the indispensable component of a word, and that the meaning of every word is a concept which is an act of thought. He goes on to say that "since generalizations and concepts are undeniably acts of thought, we may regard meaning as a phenomenon of thinking" (Vygotsky, 1962). This intimate relationship between thought and language points to the profound closeness that linguistic expression has to an individual's or a community's identity and world view. However, "thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them" (Vygotsky, 1962). So, not only do we need language to express our thoughts, but language is necessary to assist in the formation of those thoughts. AAVE serves all of these purposes for its speakers, and even for those who do not speak it but are exposed to its linguistic manifestations of thought.

There are different models for looking at the meaning behind the lexical level for different languages. Weinreich (1953) and de Groot (1992) developed models to deal with bilingual memory representation and organization. I believe that these models are also helpful in considering some aspects of bidialectal memory representation.

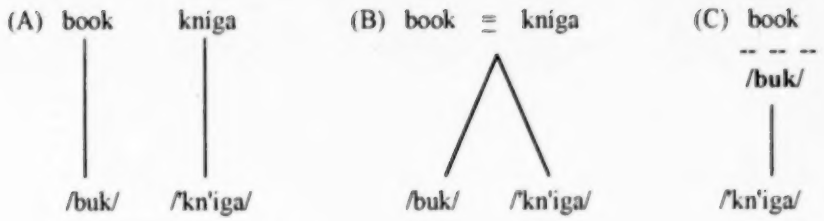

Figure 1. Three organizations of stored knowledge in bilinguals. A= coordinative; B= compound; C= subordinative; Signifier (lexical) below, signified (conceptual) above. (Weinreich, 1953)

Figure 1 shows the three types of bilingual language organization, *coordinate*, *compound*, and *subordinate* identified by Weinreich (1953). The coordinate representational system suggests that there are two separate conceptual systems for the two separate lexical systems. In the compound representational form one conceptual representation is shared by two lexical systems. The subordinative model changes the notion of equal access to one of privileged and indirect access. In the subordinative model, a person's primary language (or dialect) is a gatekeeper to the conceptual representation. Using these models to consider the relationship between the dialect of Standard English and the dialect of AAVE in the minds of bidialectal speakers helps us get away from the deficiency model- that AAVE is merely incorrect Standard English. These models illustrate how AAVE has access to conceptual representation that is sometimes privileged access or access to a unique semantic store.

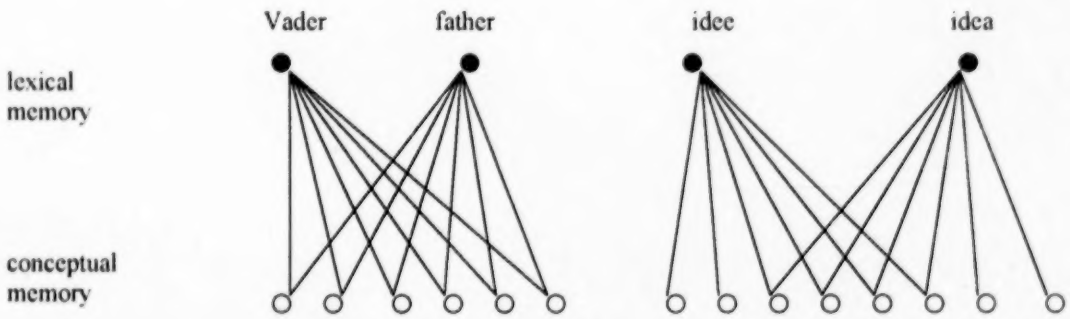

Figure 2. Conceptual representations in bilingual memory. (Groot, 1992)

Figure 2 shows De Groot's (1992) model which adds complexity to the conceptual representations for each lexical item. For synonyms in the two different languages or dialects, there may be some variation in the overlap of conceptual representation. For translation equivalents, all of the conceptual associations for that lexical item might be the same. For other lexical items, that may at first seem like translation equivalents, there is only partial overlap or, I would add, no overlap at all. I think that this model is especially helpful in conceptualizing the relationship between the Standard English lexicon, the AAVE lexicon, and their corresponding semantic representation. The examples of *be* and *steady* in Baugh (1999) confirm the applicability of this model for the relationship between AAVE and Standard English, and also for the relationship of these two dialects in a bidialectal's memory organization. While *be* and *steady* are lexical items that are shared by two dialects of English, only part of their semantic representations are shared. They also maintain unique semantic qualities in one or both of the dialects.

Baugh (1999) points out that in AAVE "*be* provides a grammatical tool that is unavailable to speakers of standard English" (Baugh, 1999). AAVE speakers make the differentiation between absence and presence of copula to mean a momentary versus a perpetual state. For example: *1) My father, he work at Ford. He tired. 2) My father, he work at Ford. He be tired.* (Smitherman, 1977). In the first sentence, the person's father is tired today or right now. In the second sentence, the person's father is perpetually tired. In Standard English the semantic representation does not differentiate between momentary versus perpetual for the verb 'to be' but requires some other marker in the sentence to indicate a momentary versus perpetual state. However, for AAVE the absence versus presence of *be* serves the semantic function of indicating a momentary versus perpetual state. So, while one might expect that the lexical representations of 'to be' in Standard English and AAVE would perfectly overlap in semantic representation, they do not.

This is also the case with the word *steady* in AAVE and its close counterpart *steadily* in Standard English (Baugh, 1999). Figure 3 shows that while there is some overlap of meaning, there are also unique semantic representations for each in the two dialects.

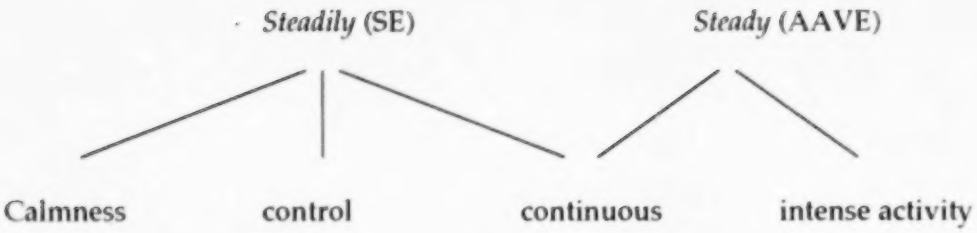

Figure 3. Semantic representations for lexical items *steadily* (SE) and *steady* (AAVE).

This figure as well as the earlier example of the verb 'to be' illustrate the differences between AAVE and Standard English as language systems with unique and shared semantic representations for lexical items. Considering these two examples, it is clear that AAVE is not a substandard version of English, but has its own system and representation. These and the following examples also emphasize the care and attention required when translating between the two dialects.

Other semantic representations that are unique to AAVE and different from the semantic representations in Standard English have come about through various processes. Smitherman (1994) identifies a process called "Semantic Inversion" which entails AAVE speakers taking words and giving them the opposite meaning from the SE semantic representation. For example, *fat*, or *phat*, is something or someone who is excellent or desirable and *bad* is good (Smitherman, 1994). Another way new semantic representations are created for lexical items is simply by adding another level of meaning, one that is unique to the black experience or can only be deciphered by other AAVE speakers in the community. When a layer of Black Semantics is added it increases the range of possible referents (Smitherman, 1977). This process is a tradition that can be easily traced back to slavery when slaves had to strategically communicate with one another in order to avoid punishment. Spirituals are a good example of this. Though the language of spirituals is Christian, that was only one layer of meaning that the slaves intended (West, 1999). Another level of meaning was very specific to their experience as slaves. So lexical referents such as *home*, *Canaan*, or *heaven* also carried the meaning of Africa. And later, referents such as *train*, or *freedom* would have a double meaning, spiritual and socio-political

(Underground Railroad) (Dillard, 1976). Dillard (1976) refers to this as double meaning, or disguise language- the act of adopting the dominant culture's terminology and giving it another meaning. It is also referred to as a camouflaged form, a form that is shared by more than one dialect but maintains unique grammatical/semantic qualities in each dialect (Baugh, 1999).

As is the case when any languages or dialects come into contact with each other, linguistic borrowing is likely to happen both ways. However, considering the power differential between AAVE and Standard English it strikes me as more problematic when Standard English incorporates features or expressions from AAVE without fostering a cognizance or appreciation of the source of those newfound representations. Apparently, speakers of Standard English find something useful and valuable in AAVE but won't admit it when it comes to educational policy or linguistic attitudes. It is also possible that Standard English speakers are simply not aware of some of the cultural references or origins of the expressions, which may also mean that the semantic layers are not fully understood or appreciated (Smitherman, 1977). However, AAVE is a part of the American cultural mainstream because many Black semantic concepts do enter into and enrich the language of all Americans (Smitherman, 1977). Clarence Major points out that Black musicians alone have contributed significantly to the informal language most Americans speak (Smitherman, 1977). Smitherman (1977) lists some of the words Black musicians have coined: *jazz*, *hot*, *cool*, *cooking*, *gig*, and *funky*. AAVE not only reflects the reality and worldview of its speakers through its unique lexical and semantic representation, it also touches a chord in speakers of other dialects, either by providing a different and more succinct expression of reality, or by expanding thought and reflection to see more of the truth revealed in the world through a different lens and experience.

Central to my discussion and assertion that AAVE offers a unique, irreplaceable system for the expression of thought, identity, and representation of experience and reality is that AAVE, when compared with Standard English or other dialects or languages, serves a different function from alternate styles , or serves the same function in a different way than any other dialect of English. Baugh (1983) illustrates this nicely in the following figure.

Common Linguistic Denominators: Functional Domains:

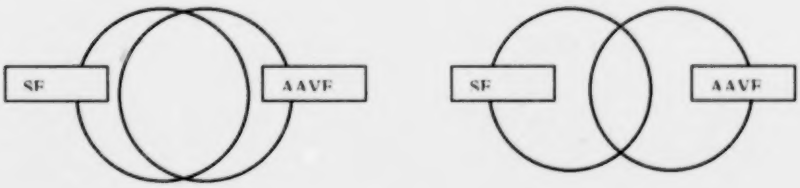

Figure 4. Common linguistic denomiators and functional domains for African American Vernacular English and Standard English.

While African American Vernacular English and Standard English share many common linguistic features, the functional domains of the two dialects have less overlap (Baugh, 1983b). This is a good example of the value of linguistic diversity. It shows that Standard English is insufficient to by itself satisfy the need of every speaker in every situation.

Political/counterhegemonic expression

Many of the processes used in AAVE in the altering and expanding of semantic representation is used as a deliberate and strategic counter-hegemonic linguistic act. Creating an additional level of meaning is a way to ensure that no other group in power is in control of the linguistic code. As bell hooks describes, it is an act of freedom and self-definition:

> When I need to say words that do more than simply mirror or address the dominant reality, I speak black vernacular. There , in that location, we make English do what we want it to do. We take the oppressor's language and turn it against itself. We make our words a counterhegemonic speech, liberating ourselves in language. (bell hooks in Perry & Delpit, 1998)

Language can be both limiting and oppressive, as well as a tool for counter-cultural expression, and AAVE is uniquely equipped with this potential for its speakers. Of course, words and expressions can't be counter-hegemonic if the hegemony is using them. The lexical and semantic representations of AAVE change rapidly to maintain its separateness and its meaning. "Language is the formative organ of

thought," Humboldt states (Humboldt, 1963). It is not a stretch to conceive of language's centrality to political thought and counterhegemonic expression and that particular dialects would have this as a central function of their language. For AAVE, political/counterhegemonic speech acts have been central from the beginning.

Expression of Identity

AAVE is very closely connected to personal and community identity, although African Americans' attitudes toward AAVE's role in the African American community run the gamut. The self-definition that happens with AAVE is simultaneously an act of definition in contrast to something and an act of definition in affiliation with something. AAVE allows for self-definition against whiteness- basically, defining who you are by defining who you aren't. This can be problematic, especially in education, because if students are equating Standard English with whiteness it becomes more difficult for teachers to facilitate the acquisition of Standard English, and therefore more difficult for students to participate in society in the ways having Standard English makes possible. Oakland Unified School District recognized this problem and attempted to do something about it with the controversial Oakland Ebonics Resolution. School Board member Toni Cook explained, "Our kids are being ridiculed if they speak Standard English- 'ugh, you talk like a white girl!' So this is the problem we're faced with and this is how we're going to deal with it" (Asimov, 1997). Baugh (1999) explains further that "many students come to equate acquisition of literacy with two negative characteristics: abandonment of native linguistic identity and an abhorrence of any behavior that could be considered 'acting white'"(Baugh, 1999). However, if students feel that their native dialect is respected and valued, they will be less likely to view the acquisition of another dialect in terms of identity loss or compromise.

> AAVE is also an act of affiliation with a particular identity. Baugh (1999) points out:
>
> Many speakers of Black English view this dialect from an entirely different perspective: they value it. Their personal and cultural identities are closely linked to the language of their friends, family, and forebears. And AAVE symbolizes racial solidarity. (Baugh, 1999)

Not only is it a language that honors friends, family, and forebears, these affiliations weave a linguistic web of personal identity in relationship to a community and a cultural group. As a member of a particular cultural group, language reflects a different world view (Humboldt, 1963). In other words, it is a lens by which its speakers can interpret and express their unique experience of the world (Nieto, 2000). Humboldt explains the relationship between identity and language in an eloquent way:

> The same act which enables him to spin language out of himself enables him to spin himself into language, and each language draws a circle around the people to whom it adheres which it is possible for the individual to escape only by stepping into a different one. The learning of a foreign language should therefore mean the gaining of a new standpoint toward one's world-view...because each language contains the entire conceptual web and mental images of a part of humanity. (Humboldt, 1963)

This quote not only emphasizes the intimacy and importance of the relationship between a person's language and identity, it also portrays the added richness and complexity we experience in our world because of the diversity of cultural experience and linguistic expression.

Artistic Expression

Doing any justice to the contributions AAVE has made in art and literature would require much more than what I will be able to draw attention to here. Much of AAVE's contribution in the artistic realm is closely related to political expression, affirmation of identity, and the unique linguistic contribution a cultural group can bring to humanity's understanding of the world. Art is a method of wrestling with one's identity and relationship to the world and an individual's use of their language or dialect is a critical part of the process. The more linguistic tools an artist has available, the better they will be able to more closely approximate and articulate the thoughts behind the words. Many African American novelists and poets are bidialectal and have found both Standard English and AAVE useful tools for expression. AAVE is not merely a substitute tool, or an inferior tool compared to Standard English, it is a different tool that can do different things from other dialects of English. Toni Morrison's novels could not have been written using only Standard English. Langston Hughes', August Wilson's, and

Zora Neale Hurston's artistic form and expression would have been severely limited without the option of calling upon AAVE and all of the significance behind it and its referents. The act of translating something from one dialect or language into another is always a good reminder of the value and aesthetic of the original language. As Carrie Secret said, "The beauty of our language gets lost in translation" (Perry & Delpit, 1998). Reading something in translation is never as good as the real thing, and this is true for a reason. Every language and dialect is unique and important, and contributes something that no other language or dialect could. AAVE is a unique and important dialect that contributes something that no other language or dialect could. It is the realization of AAVE's separateness, its uniqueness, and its different ways of representing and expressing that make it clear that AAVE is a valuable asset to its speakers who are artists and to others who benefit from that art. AAVE continues to produce and to be used by linguistically gifted individuals for the purposes of art, identity formation, and counterhegemonic expression.

It is important for schools and teachers to recognize the valuable purposes AAVE serves as well as the linguistic principles that support linguistic diversity, the validity of every language and dialect, and language rights for individuals and communities. Using these principles as a foundation, teachers have the opportunity to view students' home language as an asset to be built upon rather than as an obstacle to be overcome.

Pedagogical Implications for the Language Arts Classroom

The body of knowledge that mainstream teachers have as far as what works for students of the majority culture has not worked for all language minority and minority students (Baugh, 1999). And in a time when the teaching force is moving in the opposite direction of the changing demographic makeup of the student population (Ladson-Billings, 1994), the world views represented by teachers and those of students and their families continue to be mismatched. In a school culture that reinforces white middle class culture, students whose home culture is congruent to school culture show steady increases in performance from when they first encountered school. Rickford (1999) shows in a comparison between Palo Alto School District and Ravenswood School District (a district serving primarily students of color)

that students in the Ravenswood Schools show steady decline in performance from when they first encountered school. Rickford suggests that the mismatch between school and home culture, and the misunderstanding and prejudice on the part of the schools not only prevents these children from being successful but actually leaves them worse off than they were when they arrived at school (Rickford, 1999). Labov (1995) notes that these students arrive at kindergarten full of enthusiasm and motivation. However, as time passes, "the pattern of reading and educational failure that ensues throughout the school years for these students is progressive and cumulative. Though it may be conditioned by early handicaps, it is largely the result of events and interactions that take place during the school years" (Labov, 1995).

Teachers and school cultures are very powerful forces that have the capacity to nurture and grow capable and confident students. But, when we fail a particular group of students it is critical that we not fall prey to operating from a deficit model. In fact, reading and school-related failure among African American students continues and is unrelated to the students' IQs or the language and cognitive capacities of these students outside of school (Spears-Bunton, 1996). Schools and educators can focus their energies on creating, altering, or restructuring learning environments or curricula that will capitalize on and add to the literacy and cognitive skills that the students bring to school (Harris, 1995). So, public schools are given the challenge of facing this problem with humility, flexibility, and creativity particularly in the area of language arts education since it has been shown that a student's performance in English is a good predictor of how successful he/she will be in other subjects as well (Rickford, 1999). We can approach this challenge through a careful analysis of the classroom (the learning environment, the teacher/student relationship, the teacher's philosophy and approach) and through the curriculum (curriculum content, organization, and strategy).

The Classroom

Learning environment

A learning environment that successfully nurtures students' abilities and desire to learn must first be an environment of acceptance and appreciation. If children receive blatant or subtle messages on a

regular basis that say that they are incompetent, wrong, stupid, or deficient this will no doubt have a profound, negative impact on the child's relationship to school and learning. "In such an atmosphere of rejection, no child can thrive" (Lippi-Green, 1997). In the Ann Arbor Black English Trial, students faring badly was connected to teachers' negative attitudes about their speech (Rickford, 1999). If students are constantly affirmed of their worth, their intelligence, and their abilities, the result could be quite different. However, these messages have to be sent out of an authentic belief that these children are intelligent and capable people, not just as a strategic effort to improve achievement. Labov (1995) emphatically states that any linguistic principles employed in a school or class must be embedded in this larger philosophy that the children are intelligent and capable, and that it is "only in such a perspective that the standard language can be presented as an avenue towards educational advancement and the improvement of economic opportunity" (Labov, 1995)".

An authentic belief in African American students' ability and intelligence (as well as a belief in other students of color) would lead to an incorporation of a multicultural approach in the school and classroom environments. But not just a token or residual multiculturalism, which is an approach which focuses on tolerance and positive attitudes toward other cultures but is founded on the premise that any core or significant differences would eventually dissolve leaving behind the non-threatening remnants of food, folklore, and surnames (Smolicz, 1996). A meaningful multicultural program, which Smolicz (1996) calls stable multiculturalism, would encompass the complexity and dualism/pluralism that results from the co-existence of cultures. This approach is characterized by cultural maintenance coupled with genuine cultural dialogue between minority and majority cultures (Smolicz, 1996). I think this point is important. A multicultural approach is not only for minority students, all students benefit from multicultural curriculum. A commitment to stable multiculturalism would mean a commitment to integration and diversity with the underlying philosophy that all cultural groups have valuable contributions to make to our intellectual landscape. But the promotion of multiculturalism cannot co-exist with simultaneous attacks on language (Smolicz, 1996). It is not enough to include certain aspects of culture while excluding language. It is also not enough to give lip service to an ideal but act in a way

that communicates something else entirely. A teacher may say that AAVE is valid while relegating it to only playground and free time interactions; meanwhile, the covert message is very clear (Lippi-Green, 1997).

Structuring a learning environment begins with philosophical foundations. These underlying beliefs and philosophies are visible through the priorities and emphases the school places on particular aspects of education. What is the purpose of education? If the answer is that it is to develop children's minds, their creative capacity, their ability to think critically, and their belief in their own ability then a school will look a particular way. There will be a focus on higher order thinking (inferential and critical problem solving, comprehension, representation, elaboration, inductive inquiry, synthesis, and evaluation) (Cooper, 1995). The learning environment would also develop an ownership and relevance that lead to an expanded purpose of learning rather than teacher and student motivation being driven by what going to be tested (Cooper, 1995). Along with the expanded purpose of learning, there may be greater flexibility and openness to what is valuable to learn. An expanded definition of literacy might include music and art, both of which are symbolic representations and have a system for communicating. To "read" these forms of expression could enhance skills which are more commonly associated with literacy. Ultimately, a learning environment that will promote intellectual development for students requires an understanding of the deep values and philosophies that drive the learning environment, careful and conscientious planning, constant reflection and a willingness to revise and adjust as needed.

Teacher approach/attitude

It is particularly important for white teachers who work with students of color to be cognizant of cultural assumptions and underlying beliefs that they might have. As a teacher of a bilingual class made up of Latino students, I had to struggle with my own set of beliefs and how my world view affected my relationship with those students. Banks (1996) points out that people like me "who are born and socialized within the mainstream culture of a society rarely have an opportunity to identify, question, and challenge (our) cultural assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives because the school culture usually reinforces those that they learn at home and in their communities." Teacher preparation can help teachers

prepare for work in diverse situation and develop their multicultural competence by seeing multicultural competence "as a continuum that begins with self-awareness and knowledge and extends to thinking critically about society and making a commitment to transformative teaching" (King & Ladson-Billings, 1990).

Questioning what is "a given" often means turning the assumption on its head and considering an alternative conclusion. If AAVE and SE are equal in linguistic and cultural terms but AAVE is rejected by mainstream society and that rejection has a negative effect on AAVE speakers, is the solution to get rid of AAVE in favor of Standard English? Is this the only solution? Lippi-Green (1997) frames this as a set of facts and offers an alternative conclusion: Mainstream society must learn to accept AAVE. Lippi-Green (1997) points out that while two parties are usually mutually responsible in communication (Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986), but when one speaker has an accent or a different dialect, members of the dominant language group refuse to accept their responsibility and make the other person carry the responsibility of the communicative act. It is our responsibility to get over our prejudice, it is not up to the other person to assimilate so that we won't have to be prejudiced. It is important to work to change the prejudice rather than the target of the prejudice (Lippi-Green, 1997).

A careful look at our cultural assumptions will allow us to weigh the arguments and the data regarding AAVE and come to conclusions that will put the learner first. Edwards (1995) cites studies that disprove the deficit theory and state that AAVE does not interfere with the reading process. Labov has argued that the overwhelming linguistic evidence suggests that the additive model is applicable to the bidialectal situation (Baugh, 2000). Linguists state that AAVE is rule governed and legitimate (Baugh, 2000; Lippi-Green, 1997). With a critical eye we see that to criticize AAVE for incongruence between its phonology and written Standard English (the example of "ask" as "ax") is illogical because we can think of many examples in Standard English when the phonology does not match the written system (Lippi-Green, 1997). These realizations free us up to view AAVE as a legitimate language, an asset, and to recognize students' linguistic strengths and to build on those strengths (Au & Kawakami, 1994). By

viewing Standard English acquisition as an addition rather than a substitute respects students' cultures and takes away the threat to their identity.

Teacher/student relationship

As I mentioned earlier, teachers have a tremendous effect on students' performance in school. If teachers have lower expectations for particular students, this affects the teachers' behavior towards those students which subsequently affects student performance. For example, a teacher may ask less challenging questions of a student who he/she has low expectations for (Rickford, 1999). This in turn gives that child less of an opportunity to develop certain skills and the damaging impression that he/she is not a good student, or isn't smart. Social psychology literature supports this. Chen and Bargh (1997) found that when stereotypes are activated, even unconsciously, a perceiver's judgement and interpretation of behavior is altered in a way that confirms the expectancies affiliated with the activated stereotype (Chen & Bargh, 1997). The concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy is that when a person believes or expects something to happen, generally he/she tends to find evidence that confirms that expectation (Merton, 1948). In addition to this bias, however, it is possible for the expectation itself to affect the outcome thereby fulfilling the prophesy (Merton, 1948). So it is not only the perceiver's interpretation that is altered, but the behavior and interaction that follows the expectation may in fact facilitate the fulfillment of that expectation. Students tend to perform in congruence with what teachers expect from them (Cooper, 1995). "If teachers expect you to do badly, you are more likely to do badly; and if they expect you to do well, you are more likely to do well" (Rickford, 1999). Figure 5 demonstrates the cyclic reinforcement of expectations that yield an effect on the interpretation of behavior or a change in the behavior itself, and subsequently use this as evidence to confirm the original expectation that was based on stereotype.

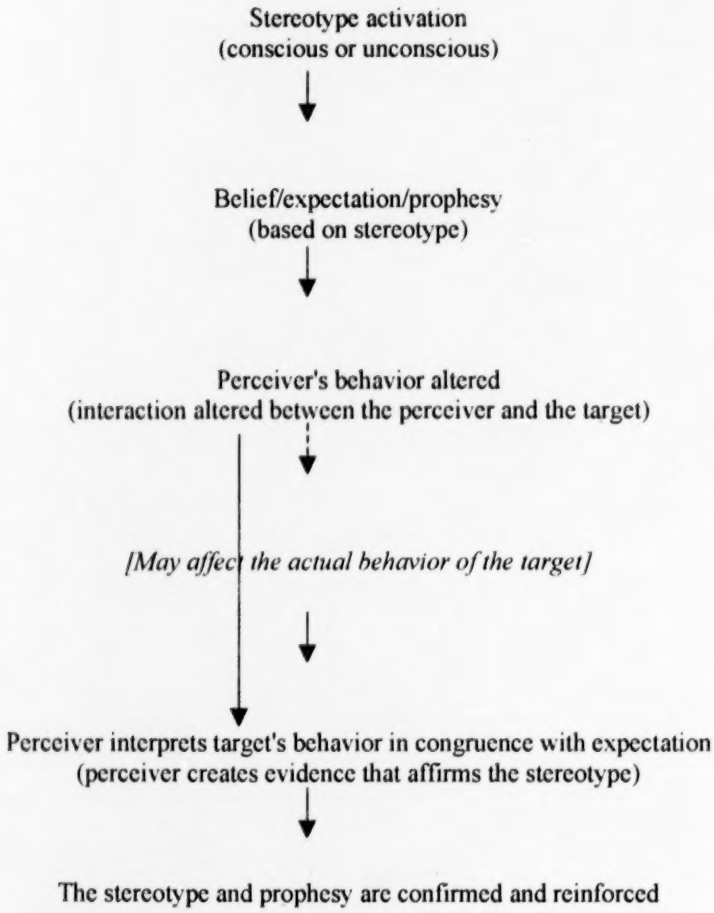
Stereotype activation
(conscious or unconscious)
Belief/expectation/prophesy
(based on stereotype)
Perceiver's behavior altered
(interaction altered between the perceiver and the target)
[May affect the actual behavior of the target]
Perceiver interprets target's behavior in congruence with expectation
(perceiver creates evidence that affirms the stereotype)
The stereotype and prophesy are confirmed and reinforced

Figure 5 shows the cycle of stereotype activation and validation based on research on self-fulfilling prophesy (Chen & Bargh, 1997; Merton, 1948).

Before we assume that students themselves are the reason for failure in school, it is important to recognize the close relationship between teacher expectations and student achievement. Researchers looked for evidence that African American language was the cause of African American students' reading problems, but research suggests that the differences in language do not lead to incompetence in Standard English (Edwards, 1995). In fact, Edwards (1995) cites 5 studies that suggest that reading failure was due not to African American Language but to teachers' attitudes toward that language.

Teachers may not always realize how influential they can be, for better or for worse. Hollins and Spencer (1990) found that the relationship between teacher and student not only affected performance but also the value students placed on the content of that course (Hollins, Smiler, & Spencer, 1994). Students' favorite subjects correlated with their favorite teachers; and the positive relationship with these teachers resulted in student perseverance in completing difficult assignments (Hollins et al., 1994). What constitutes a "favorite teacher" or a "good teacher/student relationship"? Hollins, Smiler and Spencer (1994) note that favorite teachers were those who showed concern for the students' problems and needs, were responsive in personal ways, and empowered students to develop their own ideas through assignments and discussions.

Some researchers have pointed to the benefits of complex dialogue in discussing everything from content to realities in students' lives (Lippi-Green, 1997;Farmbry, 1995; Fine, 1995; Smitherman, 2000). Using predominantly lecture format presumes that one-size-fits-all and avoids the work and rewards that come with making teaching a dialogue rather than a lecture (Lippi-Green, 1997). This applies not only to the teaching of language, but also to teaching about language. Students live with paradoxes and complexities on a daily basis. A simplified view that is forwarded to protect students or avoid issues does not give students the credit or respect they deserve. Students might appreciate teachers allowing room for the messiness of unresolvable contradictions or conflicts such as the statement: "I acknowledge that my home language is viable and adequate and I acknowledge that my home language will never be accepted" (Lippi-Green, 1997).

A dialogue approach would allow for complexity and paradox. Teachers would not always be able to execute lesson plans that have a prescribed answer at the end of the road. The class would have to wrestle with the issues and, like intelligent people, come up with their own conclusions. Researchers urge teachers to dialogue with students about sociocultural dynamics of language (Lippi-Green, 1997; Smitherman, 2000), to discuss the discrepant opportunities available to people with a diploma based on social class, race, and gender and the disparate costs when a person doesn't have a diploma based on the same demographics (Fine, 1995), and to discuss multiple levels of literacy bringing an expanded

definition and purpose to being literate (Farmbry, 1995). A frank discussion about issues may reframe literacy and language in relevant terms for students. As they participate in a dialogue, they may see themselves on the map, develop a new understanding of their relationship to school and learning, and hopefully, discover their own initiative and be agents in their own education.

The Curriculum

Curriculum Content

Students are most motivated when there is a real purpose to what they are doing. In order to promote literacy among African American students, we need to promote literacy for a purpose. Outside of school, reading does not happen without a purpose: to glean information, to think about new ideas, to enjoy, to understand. Finding ways to make literacy meaningful may involve redefining or expanding our notion of what literacy is. One technology magazine recently ran an article that pointed out how technology is changing what types of skills adults will need (Brown, 2000). The author suggested that navigation might be the newest kind of literacy. In Language Arts, giving attention and credence to the value of verbal ability and the variety of possible ways a person can write an effective paragraph or essay would expand the notion of literacy so that more students can have their valuable skills recognized. These unconventional ways of being literate may actually be more of an asset in the working world (Lippi-Green, 1997).

Another way to make literacy relevant and meaningful is to facilitate students' attempts to link texts with their own experience. When students can relate new information to prior knowledge or frame it in terms of an existing schema they are more likely to engage with the text and be analytical about the concepts and ideas presented in the text (Shade, 1994). Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson (1979) found that when a letter writer matched the demographics of the letter reader, the reader was able to read faster with more recall and make culturally appropriate extensions of the text. In a study following two high school girls' interactions with texts in a language arts course, (Spears-Bunton, 1996) found that both girls' (one African American and the other white) experience of literature was enhanced by the introduction of *The House of Dies Drear* by Virginia Hamilton. Paula was inspired to write a comparative paper about

the door in the Scarlet Letter (prison) and the door in *The House Dies Drear* (freedom). Courtney gained a deeper understanding that cultural differences are not merely superficial and this was an opportunity for her to question her biases and assumptions (Spears-Bunton, 1996).

Introducing literature that incorporates AAVE will reinforce to students that Black language and Book language are not mutually exclusive (Perry & Delpit, 1998). In her analysis of signifying as a tool for literary interpretation, Lee (1993) recognizes that one feature of AAVE is its rich way of expressing metaphoric thoughts with powerful imagery. There also exists a strong connection between the spoken language and literary language of the text. Henry Louis Gates calls this the speakerly text (Lee, 1993). Students who discover the intimate relation between speech and writing may also discover a way to approach their own writing. By employing the strengths of their rhetorical and expressive styles students can develop their personal voice in their writing- something that is an essential literary skill (Rickford, 1999).

Curriculum organization

For both reading and writing instruction it is important to set aside a separate time to focus on the whole picture and a separate time to focus on the technical details that support the whole picture. Correctionist teaching or the interruption approach (when students are corrected frequently, in the middle of a reading passage, or when responses to a written work only include comments that point out technical errors) have been found to result in a withdrawl from the learning process, a hesitancy to participate or offer ideas, and emphasize successful decoding without interacting with the text in a meaningful way (Baugh, 2000; Rickford, 1999; Smitherman, 2000). It is strongly recommended that educators consider re-ordering priorities so that students are encouraged to work in a top-down approach, first focusing on analysis of meaning and content and then looking at form. Nothing kills a student's spirit like seeing his/her writing- a piece of self- marked up in red with no attention paid to what was being said. Smitherman (2000) encourages an "emphasis on content and message, logical development, use of supporting details and examples, analysis and arrangement, style, specificity, variation of word choice, sentence structure, originality, etc." She sees these as the real components of rhetorical power which can

be achieved in any dialect. We do not have to choose between good grammar and good sense, as Smitherman puts it, but in order to develop both it is important to be clear with students about the assignments, evaluations, and time set aside dedicated to content or form. Something like Daily Oral Language sets aside a time to analyze form as a class in a way that students know what is expected of them and know that they can expect the teacher to distinguish their grammar from their message.

In addition to thoughtfully organizing time to focus on holistic and time to focus on technical aspects of reading and writing, it is important to provide a curriculum structure that makes room for the use of both AAVE and SE. As I see it, there are two goals that should be emphasized in regards to language in a language arts program:

- Students' native dialect is supported and the skills they bring to school are acknowledged, capitalized on, and developed in order to affirm their cultural identity and their inherent intellectual capacity.
- Students and teachers engage in discussion around issues that relate to Standard English and find purposes and strategies for students' acquisition of Standard English as a second dialect.

The key is that focus on both does not make the teaching Standard English in reading and writing inefficient. Rather, a teacher's ability to connect with students, and students' abilities and motivation to study language will be enhanced because language study will be relevant rather than imposed.

Pedagogical Strategies

Knowing the linguistic features of AAVE and the rules and structure of its use can help teachers and curriculum developers identify efficient ways to scaffold skills and add Standard English to AAVE speakers' repertoire. Rickford (1999) calls this the linguistically informed approach. (Rickford, 1999) provides us with an extensive list of features of AAVE on pages 4-9 and page 293 of his book. Using this and other resources as a guide, teachers can identify aspects of students' writing and reading that follow phonological or grammatical rules in AAVE. Identifying and distinguishing these as instances of linguistic differences rather than as unfounded mistakes changes the attitude and strategy with which a teacher might respond. Instead of marking that linguistic feature as incorrect, a teacher might incorporate a regular time to do contrastive analysis of SE and AAVE features that would call attention to the

particular aspects that differ between the two and would be a venue for teaching SE grammar explicitly (Labov, 1995; Rickford, 1999). Another way to study SE by way of AAVE is to use translation in the classroom. The act of translating between the two dialects is one way students can gain appreciation for the different systems and how they express meaning. An interview with a teacher who has used this approach in her classroom can be found in (Perry & Delpit, 1998).

In an effort to build up Standard English reading proficiency, Labov (1995) lays out some practical principles based on research on AAVE and AAVE speakers in the classroom. Based on the phonological feature in AAVE that final consonants are dropped, Labov (1995) recommends that teachers give more attention to the ends of words and facilitate Standard English pronunciation by presenting these words in a particular phonological context. For example, words whose final consonants tend to be dropped in AAVE should be embedded within a phonological string. So, *test* should be presented as *test of* or *testing* rather than *This is a test* (Labov, 1995). In an effort to make meaning explicit, use the full forms of contractions before using contractions (Labov, 1995). This makes the morphological unit more apparent in speech and writing and the student will be better able to perceive it. In short, it is important to make the differences between AAVE and SE salient and explicit for students, and to wrestle with this comparative study of language in a value-free manner.

Other strategies for the acquisition of Standard English include adopting ESL strategies that scaffold skills on students' linguistic foundation- AAVE, such as the Standard English Proficiency (SEP) program in Oakland Public Schools (Baugh, 2000). Piestrup (1973) identified aspects of the Black Artful Approach to teaching reading which involved teachers using rhythmic play and responsiveness (Hollins et al., 1994). Other researchers have suggested using call and response or texts from popular culture (Rickford, 1999). Farmbry (1995) encourages teachers to use techniques other than drills, such as role playing or the sharing of experiences as a tool to teach language (Farmbry, 1995). Regardless of the approach employed, Labov (1995) strongly urges educators to design reading programs and curriculum that serve students with the greatest need. This, he says, is the only way to assure a reversal in the trend in reading achievement among African American students.

Conclusion

Linguistic principles support the equality of all languages and dialects and the benefits of linguistic diversity. Bilingual models applied to the case of bidialectalism point to the usefulness of both Standard English and African American Vernacular English. Both are language systems that allow for the linguistic manifestation of the thoughts of their speakers. AAVE provides a unique vehicle of expression that has made valuable contributions to art and literature, political thought, and identity formation. Recognizing the contributions AAVE has made in its community of speakers and in the United States as a whole can allow us to approach AAVE differently in the classroom. Teachers can come to view AAVE as a tool and an asset for its speakers, respecting the language and its speakers. Considering AAVE to be a legitimate language system is key to fostering classroom environments that will affirm students' identity and intelligence. This will encourage students' participation, motivation, and the realization that school and literacy are not the antithesis to their home language and identity.

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